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# Myanmar and the Road to Reform

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## President pledges comprehensive transformation

Currently on a state visit to Singapore with a delegation of ministers and businessmen, Myanmar President Thein Sein has made what is considered his most explicit commitment to democratic reform and an overhaul of the country's moribund economy and government infrastructure.

"We want democracy to thrive," he said. "I wish to assure you that I shall endeavor to establish a healthy democracy in Myanmar. We want a brighter future for our people." He asked the international community to support Myanmar's reform path, noting that the transition is fraught with challenges.

Singapore, whose GLCs -- government-linked companies -- as well as private ones have invested heavily for years in Myanmar, also known as Burma, obviously intends to play a major role in Myanmar's development. Thein Sein was in the island republic to sign a Singapore-Myanmar Technical Cooperation Agreement to cover technical assistance and training for the legal, banking, finance, trade, tourism and urban planning sectors.

Singapore will also provide English language, technical and vocational education in an effort to help Myanmar emerge from decades of isolation and under-investment in manpower.

All through 2011 Myanmar has taken measures to release political prisoners, legalize its main opposition party and relax controls on media and the Internet. These are all part of a package of reforms known as the 'roadmap to democracy'. Skeptics are beginning to hope that this time it is real.

A top Ministry of Information official recently said in a private conversation that he is enthusiastic about the pace of reform, saying that the country's overhaul of human rights and the democratic process could well leave the rest of Asean behind. The official cited Singapore and Malaysia as questioning -- half in jest -- why the country is in such a hurry.

## Facing an unknown future

As has been widely reported, Aung San Suu Kyi has reregistered her National League for Democracy Party. The NLD

expects to contest April 1 by-elections for 48 seats which fell vacant when lawmakers were elevated to ministerial positions. Of the 48, 40 are for the 420-strong lower house, six for the upper house and two for regional assemblies.

While the number of constituencies the NLD is contesting seems small, it does set an important marker for representative democracy. There are a further five lower house and 12 state/regional seats pending which were skipped during the November 2010 elections due to security concerns.

When queried about the wisdom of participating in a political framework defined by the military and stacked with regime proxies, the 66-year old Nobel Laureate was amazingly upbeat: "Elements in the government genuinely desire reform....if we wait only for solid guarantees, we can never proceed," she told reporters. "We have to take risks. We need the courage to face a future that is really not known to us."

Even if the NLD wins all the 40 lower house seats it contests in April, it would still barely wield 9.5 percent of the influence in parliament. Suu Kyi's sharp challenge to the recently cobbled constitution may seem quixotic but she carries disproportionate moral authority within the country and internationally. If and when she gets into parliament, she would be the voice of the people despite the tiny share of the seats that is projected. A source told Asia Sentinel that the president may offer her a senior government role.

#### Demand to change Constitution

On her first campaign tour to the coastal region of Dawei, 615 km south of Yangon last Sunday, Suu Kyi called for changes to the constitution, which was put together to ensure the power of the military. The document reserves 25 percent of seats for the military, allows it to appoint cabinet ministers, to unilaterally declare a state of emergency and run many critical government functions.

Dawei is where environmental activists protested successfully against the construction of a 4,000 megawatt coal-fired power plant that President Thein Sein surprisingly cancelled. Another 400 megawatt power plant is still on the drawing board as the region has been designated for major industrial projects including a deep-sea port, steel mill and petrochemical plant. Infrastructure of railways and highways are also planned to connect to Thailand.

"There are certain laws which are obstacles to the freedom of the people. We will strive to abolish these laws within the framework of parliament," Suu Ky told reporters. She has also called for transparency and accountability of government. "Elections must be free and fair. Any government which lies must be removed."

She wants an end to the military harassment of ethnic minorities, which in Myanmar include Kachins, Karens, Kerenni, Shan, Tavoyan and Mon. "If there is one person who remains without independence, it means the entire country lacks independence," she said. She favors an alignment of central government and provincial interests through promotion of sustainable tourism and environmentally responsible development.

The internal warring since 1948 has drained government finances, diverting budgets to military spending without resolution. It has led to abuses in the field and increasing disaffection of the minorities. The alienation has allowed warlords in the provinces to build their own private armies to resist Yangon forces and give cover for smuggling of timber, gemstones and heroin which do not benefit their populations.

As the provinces are rich in natural resources, there is great economic incentive for the central government to seek

access and control. Until there is an agreed platform to share benefits, resources will remain unharvested for development while all sides waste time on armed skirmishes. The people are caught in the middle.

No revenge but continue economic sanctions

The Lady - as Suu Kyi is affectionately known, has been consistent in not seeking the overthrow of the regime that disenfranchised her party. She advocates meaningful dialogue but insists on the continuation of economic sanctions by Western governments and international bodies like the United Nations.

Her insistence on blocking western aid and trade has upset many local NGOs starved of funding for much-needed basic medical, rural agriculture and education programs. The sanctions have also delayed vital investment in infrastructure for highways, bridges, railways, communications, power, water etc. The prolonged sanctions and economic isolation have hit ordinary people the most.

She must be aware of the daily hardships suffered by Myanmar citizens but is keenly conscious that allowing premature withdrawal of economic sanctions will not push the democracy agenda forward but only prolong military rule. She opted to focus on democratic reform and getting the military back to barracks.

She says the international community is poised to help Myanmar "once we are on an irreversible road to democracy." She is pushing for that momentum to be unstoppable.

Military men smile on The Lady

Suu Kyi's unwavering stand may finally have convinced the junta that rehabilitating her could unlock desperately needed foreign investment, expertise, technology, aid and trade.

President Thein Sein surprised citizens and political observers when he invited her to his official residence for a meeting on August 19, 2011. He discussed the 7-point roadmap to democracy with her and pledged 'step-by-step' progress, suggesting positive co-operation as the way forward.

She was then invited to the government-sponsored conference on macro-economic reforms where she was accorded VVIP status. The change of attitude was evident in the welcoming smiles of the generals and bureaucrats - many jostling for photo opps with her.

Another 600 NLD and other opposition members have been released from prisons. The government says there are no more 'political' prisoners in detention. Many dissidents have been charged with 'criminal activity' as defined by the military. The claim of having no more political prisoners is contested by dissidents and their families.

Suu Kyi's meeting with the president was reported on front pages with pictures. The routine vitriolic commentary against her and her party has disappeared from the state press. Her portraits are openly displayed and sold on the streets along with T-shirts and NLD flags.

Suu Kyi has taken the generals at their word. She has placed her trust in the 'roadmap to democracy' at enormous risk to herself and her supporters. Asean's strategy of 'constructive engagement' seems to be finally yielding positive results, while the west's sanctions add urgency.

Myanmar is due to assume the chairmanship of Asean in 2014. The world hopes to welcome the country as a responsible member of the international community before then.